

The Ambiguity of Authority: Anita Desai's Linguistic Fabulation in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975)

CHETNA GUPTA

UNIVERSITY OF JAMMU

JAMMU

*Marriage is Destiny,
traditionally offered to women by Society.
... Simon De Beauvoir*

Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975) can be labelled as Anita Desai's innovative experimentation in blending the human mind with the spoken and the written word. Language and literature, in the mind of a creative writer can productively be coalesced and bonded especially while delineating the intricacies and inaccessible depths of a human being's mind. The central protagonist of *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Sita, is a highly self-conscious woman whose narcissistic tendencies make it impossible for her to understand other humans and communicate with them. Sita within the fictional world of the novel functions as a highly self-aware individual, a human island inaccessible even to her husband. The heroine's existential alienation makes her an abnormal woman whose self-reflexivity insulates her from other humans. The authority and the genuineness of Sita's functional self makes her "a religious symbol without a religion, a mythic image without benefit of a myth..."¹ Even as a married woman living with her husband, Raman and her children, Sita remains as an ironically transcendent figure 'naked' by virtue of her own sensibility and the vicissitudes of her inner self. To make matters worse, Sita gets cylindrically as well as emotionally imprisoned in her past when she used to live with her father on the Manori Island. A destabilizing father-fascination bordering on the Electra-Complex complicates matters and the broken pattern of the heroine's actions "recalls the futile courage of the Sisyphus toiling to unite one pole of experience to the other".² Sita's language in which she communicates with the other personages in the narrative of the novel becomes a language of metaphysical and psychic turbulence, a fabulation of words symbolizing a chaotic, turbulent feminine personality.

The abnormality of a married woman's mind as a consequence of neurotic self-absorption and self-obsession aggravates as the narrative proceeds. Sita's existential authenticity undergoes perpetual fracture even while living within the environs of her own family. Her own husband and her children become virtually 'strangers' to her. The author's narrative clearly reflects that Sita in reality lives within the inner world of her mind and spirit. The basic inability of the heroine to communicate meaningfully with other characters arises from Sita's own cardinal obsession, especially the nostalgic hangover of the days spent on the Manori Island with her father. This particular island remains within Sita's inner self as a chronic Garden of Eden thereby rendering the language of her inner and outer self as a language of silence. Whatever language her husband and children speak becomes absolutely meaningless and purposeless for her. Ostensibly, Sita's language as a language of silence "creates anti languages... utterly opaque...."³ The utter inability of Sita to communicate productively and progressively with other characters, with her husband as well, again confirms the basic problem: Sita's 'silence', turns consciousness upon itself...⁴ eventually climaxing in transforming "the presence of words into semantic absence...."⁵

The ambiguous exigencies of Sita's own identity symbolize the existential dilemma of self versus self, something more excruciating and unsettling than self versus others. On both the planes of her consciousness, Sita ultimately proves to be an enigma not only to the reader, but possibly the author, herself, as well. Desai's heroine Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer* is invested with not only a highly problematic character and role, but also her very portrayal as the central protagonist, unloosens "the grammar of consciousness".⁶

The gender equation operating in Sita's own mind is also fractured, almost perverted. For her, men are no better than animals, "or wild animals in the forest...."⁷ For Sita, males "are nothing – nothing but appetite and sex. Only food, sex and money matter. Animals". (31) Sita goes one step further in her vitriolic attack on the opposite sex, enumerating men as worse than "pet animals...." (32) Men are labelled pariahs; They are like pariahs, you see in the streets, hanging about drains and dustbins, waiting to pounce and kill and eat."(32) These words illustrate a very emotive and lyrical eruption of a woman's fractured psyche. As a woman, Sita had never got used to anyone and from the earlier days of her marriage to Raman, she treated him a little better than stranger:

She never got used to anyone. When they lived in the first years of their married lives with his family in their age-rotted flat off Queens Road, she had vibrated and throbbed in revolt against their almost subhuman placidity, calmness, and sluggishness. (32)

The husband–wife relationship between Sita and Raman constitutes an ironic exposure of a traditional centre of authority like the family. It is the debilitating ethos of a mass society which germinates such vexatious issues, especially in the vital context of man-woman relationship. As a dangerous symptom of the problem, postmodernism breeds among humans, Sita and her husband, Raman, become ‘passive, indifferent and atomized....’⁸ Traditional loyalties among spouses operating in families, including ties and associations, “become lax or dissolve entirely....”⁹ Irving Howe has rightly remarked in his “Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction” (*Partisan Review*, 26, 1959, 426-36) that among humans belonging to such a society “passivity becomes a widespread social attitude: the feeling that life is a drift over which one has little control and that even when men do have shared autonomous opinions they cannot act them out in common....”¹⁰

Sita “de-realises the world”¹¹ in her own unique manner. A glaring instance of this problem can be witnessed when she again goes to Manori Island, her childhood ‘utopia’ with her children to rediscover her existential identity and negotiate the *angst* in her psyche. Her cocooned mind-set erupts within the anarchic terrain of her psyche. The tremors of her past life on the Manori Island with her father unleash the seismic waves to shake the very foundations of her self. A wasteland of futility, sheer disappointment and disillusionment stares her in the face. The magic of the house in which she lived with her father is gone for ever. It is only coldness, white ashes and waste shrouded in death and dissolution that greet Sita:

For a while they remained on the veranda, watching the slow, wavering bloom of light. Then she went in at last and saw what had become of the house in twenty years of absence – a waste of ashes, she saw, the cold remains of the bonfire her father had lit here to a blaze. Ashes, white, and waste. The dust lay as casually as sand on a beach; spider webs spanned the corners of the unfurnished rooms like skeletal palm leaves. (18)

Such an experience rendered by the author vis-à-vis Sita, can be analysed thematically as “melody, diction and spectacle....”¹² The “*mythos* or plot, and *ethos*, which includes both characters and setting...”¹³ and “*dianoia* or thought,”¹⁴ all integrate themselves within the scene of Sita’s envisioning her possible redemption, in case she again goes to live on Manori island.

Truly speaking, Sita's actual language of communicating with her own self and others becomes in essence the vocabulary of her mind and psyche, sequestering itself in the form of images, patterns and pastoral settings. A glaring instance of this fact can be witnessed in these lines:

She saw that island illusion as a refuge, a protection. It would hold her baby safely unborn, by magic. Then there would be the sea – it would wash the frenzy out of her, drown it. Perhaps the tides would lull the children, too, into smoother, softer beings. The grove of trees would shade them and protect them.

“To Manori” she so promptly said, then, in answer to her husband’s habitual summer query, “where shall we go this summer?” (72)

It is the algebra of her own mind which makes Sita instantly opt for Manori Island. The quadratic equation of Sita’s psychic metaphysics acts as the catalyst for her eventual choice in favour of Manori Island. As an alienated woman, who has marginalized herself, what lends legitimacy as well as credibility to the authenticity of Sita’s feminine identity is the inner language operating in the world of her mind and spirit. This virtual language of silence creates immense problems for the heroine and renders it impossible for her as well as others, including her husband, to communicate, besides constituting a major obstacle to normal behaviour and social interaction.

Once Sita’s daughter, Maneka inadvertently tramps upon a sheaf of new buds on the small potted plants in order to tell her about a party she had been to. Sita is hurt by the sight of her daughter’s insensitivity and callousness. She reflects:

She has done it unconsciously, had not meant to destroy anything at all. Destruction came so naturally; that was the horror. Even the smallest, Karan, appeared to build a tower of blocks only for the pure, lustful joy of throwing it over with a great clatter, so much more enjoying the downfall than the architecture. She winced and shrank, hearing those blocks crash. The creative impulse had no chance, against the overpowering desire to destroy. (30)

It is only after Raman arrives at Manori Island to take the children back, Sita abruptly decides to leave as well, with the following words as her final verdict on the intrinsic and inherent contradictions and mysteries of human existence:

Through her mind flowed a white, flapping succession of nappies, vests, and something quite extraordinary called “booties” that would have to be gathered together. She could see the expressionless

faces of the night nurses in the gynae ward as they leaned against the wall, one white-shod foot up against the plaster, in the greenish night light, regarding her as she came in, ravaged by the first pains.
(111)

These images recalled from her earlier sojourn on the Manori Island as an unmarried woman living with her father, again reflect Sita's problematic and complicated identity, an identity which increasingly isolates herself. It is again the language of silence which guides Sita's feminine identity and ironically determines the authenticity of her female self. Symbolically, we can say that this very inner language of silence personifies the heroine as a modern day Orpheus singing on a lyre without strings.

Manori Island as an ultimate panacea for the heroine's existential ills, eventually fails her as well. Sita's desired escape to the island becomes a sheer exercise in escapism as she tries to exercise dictates of her social conscience. Like Sylvia Plath, the famous modern American poetess, it is the awesome figure of the father which in case of Sita, like Plath, assumes the role of the gardener trampling ruthlessly upon the flower- beds of her mind. Sita's children basically belong to a metropolitan ethos in which they were born and brought up. The mother's obsessive fixation and fascination regarding Manori island complicates matters further, culminating in the heroine's inner world of her mind and spirit getting totally destabilized and even dismembered. When Sita goes to the Manori island with her children, the reminiscences of twenty years back haunt her psyche like ghost's from a dead past.

Sita's modicum of awareness instead of rationalising her mind-set only aggravates her chaotic fascination with her own feminine sensibility. Her complicated and anarchic identity encapsulates her further from any healthy human instincts. She becomes her own enemy and marital incompatibility only aggravates her everyday afflictions. Raman as a husband, totally fails to keep pace with the vagaries of his wife's inflated and complicated ego. As a mother and as a wife, Sita's troubled femininity and female individualism make her a symbolic 'island' within her own family. In this connection, Desai's perspective on postmodernist gendered problematic becomes highly interesting. As already pointed out, Sita's images whipped up in her mind by the grammar of her isolation and incompatibility create the same 'silence' which fills the extreme states of her mind. To identify these extreme psychological states, we can define these as "void, madness, outrage, ecstasy, mystic trance...."¹⁵

At no point in the novel's narrative can we identify Sita as an *ironic* individual, in fact, she is out and out an *alazonic* figure. It is primarily because of this that Raman finds his wife as a person too difficult to accommodate and live with:

It's all madness – the boys acting out that scene from the film they saw, fighting each other on the floor; Menaka and her magazines and the way she's torn all those drawings of her's I'd kept so carefully; the *ayah* taking Karan to that – that roadside dump where all the *ayahs* sit and gossip and fight; the way you laughed because I tried to keep the bird alive; the people here, all around us, living here, all *around*... she stopped, too distressed to continue. (23)

Sita's strong self-reflexive femininity and the legitimating procedures which determine the grammar of her inner language, constitute the insurmountable impediments cocooning the heroine's self, her choices and preferences. Throughout the novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* The *do-die-in-dome* that emerges about Sita is that she is revolving around her own nucleus which is she herself. Needless to say, even at the very end of the novel, one of her father's own trusted servants Moses, aptly labels her as 'mad', '*always angry*'. Even her father's servants can feel that their master's daughter is an abnormal person, nowhere approximating to her father's identity. When Sita leaves Manori island with her husband and children, Moses growls, "Let her go." (114) All this amply indicates that ambiguity becomes the defining, determining and guiding norm of Sita's self and existential interaction with the people around her, including her family. For the reader, the only path of understanding the heroine's complicated personality in terms of her fractured life and living, is the language which reverberates in the inner core of Sita's Being.

Considered in a cumulative perspective, Sita, in *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, becomes an ironic figure, a failed female Adam, whose "autonomous self-determination... philosophical notions of identity as pure autonomous essence,"¹⁶ ultimately fails to engage her as a woman either with her own self or with society at large. Climactically, as well as symbolically, Sita existentially is a failed-self whose own 'emancipation' becomes the ultimate role to endless alienation and unfathomable *angst*. Desai succeeds in portraying an Indian Postmodernist Eve whose adamic failures crystallize at the end as endless quixotic redemptions. It is a real laugh of the Medusa.

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